THE GREAT REVERSAL
3. FREE . . . TO BE A SLAVE
July 1, 2001
FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

The framers of the Constitution and the Bill or Rights could not possibly have envisioned the scope of religious diversity in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When they wrote the sixteen words of the First Amendment, 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibition the free exercise thereof,' they unquestionably did not have Buddhism in mind. But the principles they articulated – the 'nonestablishment' of religion and the 'free exercise' of religion have provided a sturdy rudder through the past two centuries as our religious diversity has expanded. After all, religious freedom is the fountainhead of religious diversity. The two go inextricably together. Step by step we are beginning to claim and affirm what the framers of the Constitution did not imagine but equipped us to embrace.

Diana L. Eck
A New Religious America

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE GREAT REVERSAL
FREE . . . TO BE A SLAVE
July 1, 2001
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 9: 51-62 (NRSV)
Galatians 5:1, 13-15(NRSV)
"For freedom Christ has set us free . . . do not submit again to a yoke of slavery . . . become slaves to one another." (Galatians 5:1, 13)

We thank you, dear God, for this good day and for this week, and for all the ways we will enjoy the inheritance of our freedom. We thank you for the freedom to speak and read and travel; freedom to imagine and to turn dreams into plans; for the freedom to be here in worship. Be with us in this hour. Startle us with your truth, your grace, your love. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

July 1, 1776, 225 years ago today, was a hot day in Philadelphia. To make matters worse, a storm struck, thunder, lightning, pelting rain. Delegates to the Continental Congress were meeting in the State House and a fateful decision was about to be made. In his new biography of John Adams, David McCullough describes how Adams, not known as a great orator, rose to speak—how he spoke logically, clearly, carefully—and, "looking into the future, saw a new nation, a new time. . .."

Later, Adams remembered his words: "Objects of the most stupendous magnitude, measures in which the lives and liberties of millions, born and unborn are most essentially interested, are now before us. We are in the very midst of revolution, the most complete, unexpected, and remarkable of any in the history of the world."

Two New Jersey delegates, Frances Hopkinson and The Reverend John Witherspoon arrived late, after Adams had been speaking for nearly an hour and was concluding. Witherspoon was a Presbyterian minister—the only clergy there. He was President of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton, and he asked if Mr. Adams would mind repeating his address. Adams good-naturedly objected that he wasn't much of an actor, but other delegates urged him and Adams began again and delivered the hour-long speech a second time.

The debate lasted nine hours. A preliminary vote on the matter of declaring independence from Great Britain was taken and nine colonies voted in favor. A motion to adjourn for the night was adopted. The tension at the City Tavern, where many of the delegates were lodging and where they talked into the night, increased as word reached Philadelphia of the sighting of a hundred British ships off New York.

They began again on the morning of July 2nd, at 9:00 a.m. At 10:00 the storm returned outside. A vote was taken. No colony opposed the motion. The colonies had declared their independence.

McCullough reflects: "It was John Adams, more than anyone, who made it happen. Further, he seems to have understood more clearly than any what a momentous day it was and in the privacy of two long letters to Abigail, he poured out his feelings as did no one else. . . ."

Adams wrote to his wife:

> **The second day of July 1776 will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illumination from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward forever more. (David McCullough, *John Adams,* p.126-131)**

They discussed the matter and refined the document for two more days. They argued over every word. Jefferson wrote these lines:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

I love that story. I love the fact that a Presbyterian minister from Scotland was there and played an important role and signed the declaration—committing an act of treason against the crown. I love the references to the Creator, to the will and providence of God, and the invocation of the idea of freedom as the heart of the whole enterprise.

They voted for a final time on July 4 and lined up and signed it and sent it out for the world to hear. Adams hoped it would be celebrated with "shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations," and that's a pretty good description of what will happen in Chicago this Wednesday. And Mr. Adams also hoped that it would be commemorated in solemn acts of devotion to Almighty God, which is what we are doing this morning.

It is an occasion, I have always thought, for people of faith to reflect on the meaning of freedom, the particular and important meaning that word has for Christians. "For freedom, Christ has set us free," Paul wrote in a letter to the Christian churches in Galatia, modern Turkey. They were Gentile churches and they were deeply divided by a disagreement over how best to be followers of Jesus Christ that focused on the question of freedom. Did they have to obey the Law of Moses? Or, were they free from the law as Paul, their teacher, had said?

Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jews. The earliest church was Jewish. The first Christians met in synagogues and never thought they would be anything but Jewish. Jesus had said that he came to fulfill the law—the Law of Moses, the foundation of their life as a people, a nation. The law—613 rules based essentially on the Ten Commandments regulated and gave order to all of life. It defined how life was to be lived with God and in community. It told you what to eat and not eat, how to dress, how to relate with neighbors, spouses, children. It's instructions included how and when to work, how to cook, how to raise children, how to farm. It included rules about feast days and fasts and sacrifices and offerings and prayers. Torah—the law—it is why Jews survived 20 centuries of exile and persecution. It is why there is an Israel today.

Trouble started when our first missionary told the story of Jesus to non-Jews, Gentiles—or Greeks, as he called them. Paul traveled into Gentile regions, spoke about Jesus so compellingly that something happened which no one anticipated. Gentiles were becoming believers. Paul baptized them and told them to stick together—told them they were the church, the Body of Christ, he even called them. By Jewish standards, they were a motley bunch, didn't look or act like God's kind of people, ate food that was unclean according to Jewish law; didn't keep Sabbath; didn't observe the fasts and feasts. Those Gentiles looked like sinners. So the Jerusalem church sent teams of teachers north to those Gentile enclaves to do some remedial work. "Paul," they said, "missed something important. If you want to be true Christians, you have to abide by the Law of Moses: the dietary restrictions, the feast days, and your men must be circumcised, just like us, just like the law requires."

When Paul heard about it, he was livid. Paul was a Jew, followed the law, kept kosher—but for non-Jews to try to become Jews on the way to being Christian was to miss the whole point. You are loved by God in Jesus Christ, he said. That love is given to you as a gift you can't earn, no matter what you do, no matter how many rules you obey or sacrifices you make. Nor can you put yourself outside the focus of God's love. It is grace—the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which saves us and redeems us and reconciles us and sets us free. We are free from all the ways people have tried to please God because God has already shown his pleasure. We are free to live in joyful gratitude, free to fulfill the real and original intent of the law—which is love for the neighbor. Paul's letter to the Galatians has been called the Magna Charta of Christian freedom.

In Christ, he wrote, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. For all are one in Christ. And he wrote: " . . . for freedom Christ has set us free . . . do not submit again to the yoke of slavery . . ."

To the good, upstanding, law-abiding people down in Jerusalem, doing the very best they could to keep all the rules, Paul must have seemed like a hopeless liberal, preaching grace, telling people that God loved them no matter what they did or didn't do. What kind of religion was that?

But Paul's message doesn't stop there. There's more. "Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery . . . and become slaves to one another."

There is in that a very sophisticated understanding of human nature and what it means to be free. "Don't submit to the yoke of slavery . . . become slaves to one another." The modern definition of freedom has to do with "autonomy, independence, sovereignty." Webster's first definition is "the absence of necessity, coercion, restraint," none of which sounds like Paul's admonition to become slaves to one another.

In fact, the Christian definition of freedom—because it is freedom in Christ, defined by Christ, differs fundamentally from the popular, cultural definition. Freedom in the abstract sounds like the right to do whatever you please, but that's not it at all. Christians are free in Jesus Christ from the necessity of earning their salvation; but because it is Jesus Christ who is doing the defining, love of neighbor, commitment to the community—is the other sides of freedom. It's grace and responsibility.

There is important truth in that idea. Those brave souls who signed the Declaration of Independence weren't thinking about declaring their right to do whatever they pleased for their own self-realization and gratification. They were declaring independence in order to become a new nation, and perhaps more than anyone else in history, they knew that freedom from external political coercion was freedom to serve the common good, and that it was going to require serious sacrifice: people were going to die for it, and fight to defend it, and work very hard to maintain it. Donald McCullough wrote, "What in another time and society might be taken as platitudes about public service, were to John and Abigail Adams a life-long creed." (p.29)

It is not about doing what you please—although the culture and the market economy in which you and I live sounds sometimes as if that is exactly what it means. University of Chicago sociologist, Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her latest book *Who Are We?* worries that in our obsession with individual rights, our insistence on the right of the individual to do whatever he or she pleases, we are losing a sense of "social covenant," a sense of obligation to the community, to our neighbor. She cites a recent automobile advertisement that is a virtual invitation to selfishness. The copy reads: "Little kids are selfish. Impulsive. They don't make rational decisions. When they see something they want, they want it now. Little kids have a lot of fun. Hmmm."

Elshtain is not alone in urging a rebirth of civil commitment, a rededication to the common good, a reinvestment in the intermediary institutions where the common good is actually strengthened: political parties, labor unions, schools and churches.

The late Thomas Merton observed: "I do not find in myself the power to be happy doing what I like . . . On the contrary, if I do nothing but what pleases my fancy, I will be miserable most of the time. This would not be so if my will had not been created to use its own freedom in the love of others." (*No Man is an Island,* p.35)

John Adams hoped that the birth of freedom would be commemorated in churches. And a fitting way for that hope to be fulfilled is for churches to remind the world that freedom—to do whatever one wants to do—is simply license and is ultimately self-destructive: that real freedom is the liberty to give oneself fully and generously to others.

That's the greatest reversal of all. Real freedom is found in the act of serving another person, an institution, a cause other than yourself.

Real freedom is discovering your self by forgetting yourself for a change.

Jesus turned a lot of things upside down. You can't earn your way into the kingdom. God has already opened the door and invites you to stop groveling, to stand up and walk in.

You can't earn God's love because God has already given it to you. All you can do is be grateful and try to live up to it.

You can't get in because you're the right race, or gender, or economic class. It's not a matter of ethnic group, income, or even sexual orientation. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female.

And now:

You're not really free when you can do exactly what you want to do. You're really free when you are voluntarily limiting your own freedom by being a servant to others. A "slave," Paul said actually, so we wouldn't miss the point.

Jesus said—if you want to find your life, you'll find a way to give it away.

Paul said, "do not submit to the yoke of slavery . . . become slaves to one another."

The Good News is about grace and it is also about responsibility.

Grace leads to freedom which leads to love. And unless you get to the love, the being a servant, you really haven't known the grace. If your freedom simply allows you to make yourself your life's project, you've missed the point.

We have an opportunity to do something like that as people of faith—as a nation, actually. In the next several months, some of us—most of us here—will receive a check from our government, a tax rebate.

We were told first that we deserved it because the economy was so robust. And then we were told that it was to stimulate the economy because it wasn't so robust. And then we were told we should have it to help pay for high energy costs this summer. And then we were told we're getting it because we know how better to spend it than the government does.

The tax rebate will not help poor people—people without health care, people who don't have jobs, or access to affordable childcare so they can have a job.

So—we who don't need this check we will receive and will probably spend on ourselves—have a chance to do something truly compassionate and help those who do need help.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if in this week that celebrates our freedom—our freedom to be servants, according to our religion—wouldn't it be something if we gave that tax rebate check away—

> **To Planned Parenthood to help poor women receive the reproduction health services they can't afford; or an adoption agency; or to a shelter for homeless persons; or to a health clinic, or a school; or to Fourth Presbyterian Church's Partners in Education, which sponsors the Center for Whole Life, which did provide sex education to 80 Cabrini Green youngsters recently, and will provide the Summer Day Program for Cabrini kids this summer and Tutoring in the Fall;or to Fourth Presbyterian Church's Children's Center which does provide day care so that working parents can keep jobs.**

I intend to do that with a tax rebate I don't really need, and I invite you to do the same—as a symbol of your freedom.

Austrian psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, survived the holocaust and later wrote very movingly about what it was like to be caught in the very antithesis of freedom, a kind of absolute imprisonment that would end in death. He wrote:

> **We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last human freedom—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (*A Rumor of Angels,* p.8)**

And so let us commemorate in solemn devotion to Almighty God and let us give thanks for this sweet land of liberty.

And let us be grateful for the Amazing Grace of God—given to each of us in Jesus Christ.

And for the freedom he gives—freedom to let go of frantic efforts to please God, freedom to love God with our heart, mind, soul and strength; freedom to love one another.

For Christians—for us—the best picture of freedom is Jesus Christ, on a cross; there voluntarily; there because of self-emptying; there because of love.

For freedom, Christ has set us free. All praise to him. Amen.